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AUTHOR Mulroy, Kevin; Palacios, Anna; Reid, Robert E.
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ABSTRACT

This is a theoretical study of adolescent maturation within a cultural context. Personality development and disintegration due to the pressure of a dominant culture on a minority culture is considered. An attempt is made to understand how teachers might assist students to work out their psychological growth by story telling. The need for cultural preservation as a preventative to dysfunction is pointed out. It is noted that suicide and drug usage among teens are exacerbated by cultural disintegration. The case of Handsome Lake of the Seneca who reversed the cultural disintegration of that tribe is recounted. The need for group and individual therapies that are culturally sensitive is discussed. Finally, the need to direct community action in preserving and using culture for prevention and intervention in educational and therapeutic settings is recommended. Classroom research was done at John F. Kennedy High School in Guam. (Contains 10 references.) (Author)

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Running Head: ADOLESCENT MATURATION IN TRANSITIONING CULTURES

Adolescent Maturation in Transitioning Cultures

Kevin Mulroy — Bethel Regional High School, Bethel, Alaska

Anna Palacios — John F. Kennedy High School, Tamuning, Guam

Robert E. Reid — University of Guam

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K. MULROY

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Abstract

This is a theoretical study of adolescent maturation within a cultural context. Personality development and disintegration due to the pressure of a dominant culture on a minority culture is considered. An attempt is made to understand how teachers might assist students to work out their psychological growth by story telling. The need for cultural preservation as a preventative to dysfunction is pointed out. It is noted that suicide and drug usage among teens are exacerbated by cultural disintegration. The case of Handsome Lake of the Seneca who reversed the cultural disintegration of that tribe is recounted. The need for group and individual therapies that are culturally sensitive is discussed. Finally, the need for direct community action in preserving and using culture for prevention and intervention in educational and therapeutic settings is recommended. Classroom research was done at John F. Kennedy High School in Guam.

The Cultural Genesis of Personality

Every culture has rituals that embody cultural values and mark transitions from one life stage to another. Marriage, adulthood, old age, etc. are only some of the important transitions that must be marked to indicate their importance and help the individual experiencing them to take on the new persona they call for. In American life, we have lost many of our rituals, or they have become more decorative than real.

Carl Gustave Jung is one of the most significant figures in the history of Psychology. He developed a theory of the unconscious mind, which was very different from Freud's theory of the subconscious. Freud felt that the hidden workings of the mind were largely a working of the repressive function and the instinctual processes. On the other hand, Jung felt that the unconscious was a dynamic structure where the mind actively examined the stuff of consciousness in a symbolic and visual way. The results were then presented in the form of dreams.

In the 1930's, an American named Joseph Campbell met Jung in Europe. From his work on the unconscious, Jung theorized that there are archetypal constructs common to the human mind that are present in the brain as potentialities requiring only activation. These constructs are the material of mythology and ritual. For example, it might be easy to see how fire might represent destruction in many cultures. From these constructs can arise rituals using this symbology.

The next stage is for ritual to become literature. In this way are produced the seminal works of each civilization. They tell the creation stories and the life experience stories which provide the cultural and personality parameters for the group and the

individual. The production of a typical personality is thus achieved. The sociologists and anthropologists refer to this as the modal personality. (Ember and Ember, 1981).

Jorge Luis Borges (1964) tells the tale of a magician teacher's discovery of his origins. What the magician discovers as he dreams is the thing he most fears, that he is the son of man, not the son of gods. He discovers that he is the stuff that dreams are made of, that language shaped him and his reality just as he shaped his student and placed him in his reality. As he says, "He feared his son might meditate on his abnormal privilege (walking on fire and not being burned) and discover in some way that his condition was that of a mere image. Not to be a man, to be the projection of another man's dream, what a feeling of humiliation, of vertigo!" (Borges, pp. 49-50).

He understands the shame, confusion, anxiety and disorientation that comes as a result of discovering that the teacher, the magician, the creator, the self is not made by a god, but is a recurring figure shaped by centuries of magicians creating the illusion of reality that embodies the human spirit. As the animals flee the forest that they inhabit with him, and the ruins of the Fire God's sanctuary are destroyed by fire, the magician discovers his origins. (Borges).

"In a birdless dawn the magician saw the concentric blaze close round the walls. For a moment, he thought of taking refuge in the river, but then he knew that death was coming to crown his old age and absolve him of his labors. He walked into the shreds of flame. But they did not bite into his flesh, they caressed him and engulfed him without heat or combustion. With relief, with humiliation, with terror, he understood that he too was a mere appearance, dreamt by another." (Borges, p. 50).

The ability to create with love makes it possible for the magician to survive "the fire next time" that eternally recurs, consuming the sham true and giving birth to the new body created out of centuries of the old. Telling our story through the use of symbolic languages is perhaps the only way we can understand the world. The one story to tell is about how we suffer, how we are delighted and how we (the individuals who make up the human community) may triumph. To know about the darkness, to know that language shapes our realities, and to know that we are the stuff that dreams are made of makes it possible for us to create and live. We can survive the insignificance of finite existence and the recurring fire if we know where we came from, with the trickster figure (the ancient spirits) occupying the dark side of our minds and commanding or creating the light. We become part of the human community that embodies the ancient spirits. (Borges).

I agree with Silko (1986) when she says, "You don't have anything/if you don't have the stories". They are our means of experiencing the truths that define our existence and forge the human conscience. The embodiments (people, places and things) that make up the stories may or may not exist as empirical realities, and the story may not be, literally, true. The point is that the story is possible, and (as parts of the story) the people, places and things come alive in dreams with which we can identify. We see them in our mind's eye experiencing the suffering, joy and triumph or failure that we experience. In this way the human community shares experience and lives together as a group. The collective dream becomes our dream. We suspend disbelief and, identifying with the characters or points of view, see what they see, do what they do and feel what they feel. We vicariously experience their struggle, encounter their difficulties, and achieve what they achieve or fail when they fail. All of us share in a kind of communion, empathizing with the character or

characters, we learn to recognize each other as brothers and sisters. Our empathy with the characters becomes empathy with each other on an individual basis. Individual misfortunes and mistakes are, shared, easier to bear; and living via love becomes possible. To struggle and to experience is the stuff that life is made of; and, as Shakespeare has Macbeth say, we're the stuff that dreams are made of.

She also talks about the purpose of life in the storytelling tradition among the Pueblo Indian tribes of which she is a member. She sees the stories as the creations that embody the experienced truths through which the culture and the people live. These are the medicine of the tribe (its power, and its protection, against evil spirits). (Silko).

The purpose of all writing and all symbolic language (music, visual art, drama, and sculpture) is to communicate. When we communicate by creating an artifact our intention is to make other people feel what we feel via our artifice. In this way we are seen, empathized with, and can share our like experiences.

Cultural Disintegration and Effects on Personality

If culture is one of the forces creating personality, then its disintegration will likely have a profound effect on personality. Many studies, indeed, have shown this to be true. The first generation of a traumatized culture will adopt a dysfunctional lifestyle that will become the normal environment of their children. Imagine, if you will, the geometric progression of dysfunction in successive generations. (Duran and Duran, 1995)

Duran and Duran feel that the mythology of the patient does not have to conform to objective reality as long as the patient believes in it and lives in a society that believes in it. This is a traditional notion of Western psychiatry in which the therapeutic goal is to bring the patient into conformity with cultural parameters as long as those parameters do not

violate mega-principles of ethics. One would not want to bring a patient into conformity with racist notions, for example. (Duran and Duran)

Where Duran and Duran evince something special is in the notion that the therapist acts on behalf of the patient by using cultural rituals that bring about resolution of the patient's conflicts. This is independent of anything that the patient may feel or do. In a sense, it is suggestive magic. Duran realized the value of cultural frameworks by attending to the dream presentations of a patient. Because of this notion of acting on behalf of the patient, Duran does not use a Rogerian approach. However, it was in Rogerian circumstances that he was "tutored' by the patient in the importance of cultural dreams. Dream work is, of course, important in many forms of therapy, particularly Jungian therapy. Dream work is an ancient realization of the power of the unconscious to communicate truth to the conscious mind. In the past, it would have been formulated, rather, as messages from the supernatural. (Duran and Duran)

Given the force and universality of cultural mythology, it is not surprising that it is so necessary to the psyche that its loss produces terrible traumas that bring about severe dysfunction and "self-medications". One perceived "solution" is suicide. Guam suffered from an epidemic of suicide by teens in 2001. Villanueva (as cited in Duran and Duran) addresses this issue also when he points out the high incidence of suicide in Native American populations. "In other words, if the culture would have remained intact, we would not be experiencing the devastating problems that we are facing." (Duran and Duran, p. 177).

What We Found in the Classroom

"The writing opportunity that followed then gave them a different opportunity to express themselves in that manner instead of in front of an audience. We hoped that they would eventually replace repressed emotions with thought and action. As we saw, there was indeed little response from the audience. A few vocal students did a considerable amount of the talking. However, the writing opportunity drew numerous responses. The responses were thoughtful as well as emotional."(Mulroy, 2001, p. 4).

We visited a 9th grade class of twenty-eight students at John F. Kennedy High School in Guam on several occasions. They were about equally divided between boys and girls. Most were Chamorro (the local indigenous culture). There was one Chinese student and three Philippino students. All students were, thus, from traditional cultures.

Traditional cultures tend to be verbally non-expressive. We therefore wanted to present the students with an opportunity to express themselves in writing. We structured the assignment for them by asking them to develop four characters: The Hero, The Villain, The Victim, and The Magical Person. They were asked to use people they knew as models for the physical and behavioral descriptions of the characters. The plot and theme/conflict, it was explained, would naturally flow from the characters.

So, what kind of characters and stories did they write? A major theme was the corruption of adults in our local society. They were concerned that these adults would not be found out and punished. They expressed their anger at authority but also looked to authority to solve problems. They could go to higher levels of authority when lower levels did not please them. They were sometimes physically afraid. They were relieved when

problems were resolved. They spoke of teams and groups and wanted to be members. Everyone had to be together. They did not want to see diversity. It would be troubling.

When asked what they learned from the assignments, they responded by saying that they had learned to use imagination. They had learned to picture things and write about them. They expressed the notion that knowing how to write was fun, and made you want to write more. They liked to work in groups and felt loneliness when working alone. One student discussed the assignment with parents who said that it would teach how to deal with problems like the corruption in local society. Some said they learned how to brainstorm ideas to understand their society better.

The grandparents of today's Chamorro youth still speak their native tongue. Many of their parents still speak Chamorro, particularly if they are from the southern part of the island which is more traditional. The majority of children in the northern part of the island which is most westernized no longer speak more than a few words or phrases at best. We did our research at John F. Kennedy High School which is in this northern area.

Language and culture are results of the need to describe and react to the experiences of the physical environment. They can evolve naturally as the environment changes, or they can be replaced by other languages and cultures. I do not believe as Whorf (1956) does that language structures thought (and, thus, culture). I believe that language and culture constantly interact. Then, what happens when the native language disappears and the new language interacts with the old culture? The behaviors of the Chamorro children still show traditional elements such as respect for authority and group sensibilities. Given the experiences of other cultures, however, it would seem likely that

these characteristics will be replaced in another generation. It is an opportune time for this society to consider its future.

Prevention and Intervention

Cultural disintegration can and must be stopped. The payoff will be a society healthier for all. Of great interest to most societies suffering from this type of trauma will be a reduction in the suicide rate, particularly among teens. Handsome Lake, a member of the Seneca Tribe (Iroquois) in 1799 began a movement to bring back the Seneca from the demoralization and alcoholism that was affecting them. By 1801 dramatic changes were already seen, and by 1815 it was clear that the Seneca had firmly re-established themselves. (Ember and Ember).

Cultural reintegration can happen. It only requires that leaders decide to take action. It is also required for leaders to understand that it is necessary to provide guidance and direction to people in the community suffering from dysfunction related to culture loss. Preserve the culture, educate the children, and give direction to the adults. Community Health Centers need to deal with individuals in a way that is culturally sensitive. In the schools, culture and language programs need to be given prime importance. School counselors need to be aware of these issues so they better understand their clients and provide culturally relevant therapy as indicated.

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